

POLITICS 3

Introduction to American Politics

Course Syllabus – Spring 2026

Instructor: Ms. Claudia Alegre (she/her)

Class Meetings: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 9:35 am – 10:50 am

Classroom: Estella Laboratory 1181

Instructor email: claudia.alegre@pomona.edu

Office: Carnegie Hall 09

Office Hours: By Appointment - [Link here](#) and on Canvas

Course Description

This course provides an in-depth introduction to American politics, exploring both the formal structures of government and the social and cultural forces that shape political life in the United States. Students will examine key institutions including Congress, the presidency, the judiciary, and federalism, as well as political processes such as elections, policy-making, and political participation. The course also addresses the role of public opinion, political identity, polarization, social movements, and media in influencing political outcomes.

In recent weeks, Minneapolis has become the site of intense political conflict after a federal immigration agent fatally shot a local resident during an enforcement operation and the federal government deployed an unusually large force of ICE and DHS personnel. These events touch on fundamental questions about federalism, law enforcement authority, civil liberties, democratic accountability, public opinion, and political mobilization. In this course, such developments are analyzed not as isolated news events, but through the lens of American political institutions, democratic norms, and competing public values.

Through a combination of lectures, discussions, and analytical writing assignments, students will learn to critically assess the relationship between democratic principles and real-world political practice. The course emphasizes active engagement with both contemporary and historical examples, encouraging students to draw connections between political theory, empirical research, and current events.

Learning Outcomes:

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

- Understand the structure and function of American political institutions.
- Analyze political behavior, including voting, public opinion, protest, and activism.

- Interpret contemporary political events using social-scientific frameworks.
- Develop and refine research questions grounded in political science scholarship.
- Communicate political analysis clearly and effectively in writing.

Course Structure

Each class session will combine lecture and individual reading assignments. Lectures are designed to provide foundational context and enhance your understanding of the week's readings—they do not substitute for completing the assigned texts. The goal is for lectures and readings to complement each other, strengthening your grasp of key theories, concepts, and debates throughout the course.

This course emphasizes discussion, creating a space where students can actively engage with the material, ask questions, and exchange ideas during each class meeting.

Required Text

Primary Textbook:

Ken Kollman, *Readings in American Politics*, 6th Edition [Reader]

Supplemental Texts (Optional, Available at Libraries or for Purchase):

No need to purchase any of these - I will be adding PDFs of all assigned readings on Canvas

1. Amy E. Lerman & Vesla M. Weaver. *Arresting Citizenship: The Democratic Consequences of American Crime Control* (2014).
 2. Katherine Tate. *Black Faces in the Mirror: African Americans and Their Representatives in the U.S. Congress* (2003).
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Grading

Participation – 10%

Regular attendance is expected. Participation involves active engagement with lectures, discussions, and group activities. Consistent attendance is crucial for keeping up with course content and for your success in group work and class discussions.

Response Essays – 30%

You will write three response essays (3 pages each) that connect course readings to real-world politics. Each essay responds to a specific prompt aligned with the course calendar. Essays should demonstrate understanding of the assigned readings and apply course concepts to contemporary or historical examples. You may draw on current events, historical cases, court decisions, elections, social movements, media coverage, or political actors. Detailed prompts available on Canvas.

Deadlines:

- Response Essay 1: February 12
 - Response Essay 2: March 12
 - Response Essay 3: April 16
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Midterm Exam – 25%

Students will complete an in-class midterm exam covering readings, lectures, and class discussions from January 20 – February 26. The midterm will take place in class on **March 3**.

The exam will include:

- Multiple-choice and true/false questions
- Short-answer questions

The midterm will be graded on accuracy, clarity, and the ability to synthesize course concepts, rewarding thoughtful application of readings to political examples.

Final Paper – 35%

The final paper is a **10–12 page research essay** responding to the **current state of American democracy**. You should draw on course readings, class discussions, and independent research to craft an analytical, evidence-based argument. The paper should demonstrate your ability to synthesize course material with broader social, political, and historical contexts.

Due: May 11 via Canvas.

Class Expectations

To foster a productive and supportive learning environment, all students are expected to adhere to the following standards throughout the course:

1. Academic Integrity and Honor Code:

This course upholds the highest standards of academic honesty. All work submitted must be your own. Plagiarism, cheating, fabrication, or any form of academic dishonesty will not be tolerated and may result in disciplinary action according to university policies. Proper citation of sources is required in all assignments.

2. Attendance and Participation:

Class attendance is mandatory. Given that films will typically be watched during class and discussions are integral to the learning experience, consistent attendance is essential for success. If you must miss a class due to illness or emergency, please notify me in advance when possible and arrange to make up missed work.

3. Late Submission Policy:

Timely submission of assignments is essential to maintain fairness and to help you stay on track with the course schedule. **All assignments must be submitted by the stated deadline.** If you anticipate needing an extension, you must contact me *before* the deadline to request an accommodation. **Late submissions without prior approval will incur a penalty of 10% off the assignment grade per calendar day late.** For example, an assignment submitted two days late without permission will lose 20% of the earned points. Assignments submitted more than **five days late will not be accepted** unless prior arrangements have been made.

4. Respectful Engagement:

Our classroom is a space for open, thoughtful, and respectful dialogue. Please listen attentively and engage respectfully with your peers and instructor, even when viewpoints differ. Disrespectful behavior, including interruptions, dismissive remarks, or discriminatory language, will not be tolerated.

5. Preparedness and Professionalism:

Come prepared by completing all readings and viewing assignments before class. Arrive on time and ready to participate actively. Use electronic devices appropriately and avoid distractions during class.

6. Communication and Emailing:

If you have questions or concerns, please first consult the syllabus and course materials. When emailing me, please allow at least 48 hours for a response before sending a follow-up message, as I strive to give thoughtful and thorough replies. You are also encouraged to attend my office hours for more in-depth discussion or assistance. Office hours provide an excellent opportunity to engage directly and clarify any course material or concerns.

By following these expectations, we can maintain a positive, inclusive, and intellectually stimulating environment for everyone!

Student Resources

Mental Health and Wellness

Pomona College is committed to supporting your mental health and overall well-being. The Health and Wellness Center offers confidential counseling and psychiatric services to help you navigate personal or academic challenges. You can access individual and group counseling, wellness workshops, and peer support programs. For more information, visit the Health and Wellness Center website or call (909) 621-8139.

Writing and Academic Support

To assist you in developing strong academic skills, Pomona provides several resources:

- The **Writing Center** offers one-on-one tutoring and workshops to support writing across all disciplines. Visit the Writing Center website for appointments and resources.

- Location: Collins Center, Room 103
 - Phone: (909) 621-8057
 - Website: pomona.edu/writing-center
 - The **Academic Support Programs** provide help with study strategies, time management, and accommodations for learning differences. More information is available at Academic Support.
 - Location: Smith Campus Center, Room 104
 - Phone: (909) 621-8548
 - Website: pomona.edu/academic-support
 - The **Quantitative Skills Center** supports students needing assistance in math, statistics, or quantitative reasoning. Visit the Quantitative Skills Center to learn more.
 - Location: Honnold Library, Room 220
 - Phone: (909) 621-8136
 - Website: pomona.edu/quantitative-skills-center
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Course Calendar

Jan 20 (Tues)

Introduction to Course

No Readings

Jan 22 (Thurs)

Foundations of American Government and Democratic Crisis

Readings

Kollman 1.4

Paul Musgrave, “Political Scientists Turned a Blind Eye to America’s Democratic Failures”

Jan 27 (Tues)

The Constitution

Readings

Kollman 2.2

Robert Dahl, “How Democratic Is the American Constitution?”

Jan 29 (Thurs)

Federalism and the Separation of Powers

Readings

Kollman 3.2

Pamela McCann et al., “Top-Down Federalism”

Feb 3 (Tues)

Civil Liberties and Civil Rights

Readings

Kollman 8.1

- Gerald Rosenberg, “The Hollow Hope” (Excerpt)

Kollman 4.4

- Weaver and Prowse, “Racial Authoritarianism in U.S. Democracy”
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Feb 5 (Thurs)

NO CLASS - PLEASE COMPLETE READING

Readings

Kollman 8.5

- Rachel VanLandingham Keck, “Court Packing and Democratic Erosion”
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Feb 10 (Tues)

Public Opinion

Readings

Kollman 9.1

- John Zaller, “The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion”
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Feb 12 (Thurs)

Political Participation and Mass Behavior

Readings

Kollman 9.2

- Donald Kinder and Cindy Kam, “Us Against Them”

Response Essay 1 Due (submit by 11:59 PM)

Feb 17 (Tues)

Political Parties

Readings

Kollman 12.1

- John Aldrich, “Why Parties?”
-

Feb 19 (Thurs)

Interest Groups and Lobbying

Readings

Kollman 11.2

- Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page, “Democracy in America?”
-

Feb 24 (Tues)

Media and Politics

Readings

Kollman 14.2

- Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, “Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election”
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Feb 26 (Thurs)

Congress and Representation

Readings

Kollman 5.1

- David Mayhew, “The Electoral Connection”
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Mar 3 (Tues)

Midterm Exam

In-class, 75 minutes

Mar 5 (Thurs)

The Presidency and Executive Power

Readings

Kollman 6.1 & 6.5

- Christenson and Kriner, “The Myth of the Imperial Presidency” (Excerpt)
 - Richard Neustadt, “Presidential Power”
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Mar 10 (Tues)

The Bureaucracy and Administrative Governance

Readings

Kollman 7.1 & 7.4

- Napolio, “Pork During Pandemics”

- James Q. Wilson, “Bureaucracy”
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Mar 12 (Thurs)

The Courts and Judicial Power

Readings

Kollman 8.2 & 8.4

- Lawrence v. Texas (2003)
- George & Epstein, “On the Nature of Supreme Court Decision Making”

Response Essay 2 Due (submit by 11:59 PM)

Mar 16–20

Spring Break

No class

Mar 24 (Tues)

Public Policy and Agenda Setting

Readings

Kollman 5.2

- Gary Cox and Mathew McCubbins, “Setting the Agenda”
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Mar 26 (Thurs)

Economic Inequality and Democratic Responsiveness

Readings

Kollman 13.4

- Achen and Bartels, “Democracy for Realists”
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Mar 31 (Tues)

Immigration, Race, and Political Behavior

Readings

Kollman 13.5

- Stephens-Dougan, “Race to the Bottom”
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Apr 2 (Thurs)

Class Cancelled / No Lecture - Professor at Conference

Apr 7 (Tues)

Gender, Representation, and Political Ambition

Readings

Kollman 13.3

- Fox and Lawless, “Gendered Perceptions and Political Candidacies”
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Apr 9 (Thurs)

Race and Representation

Readings

Katherine Tate, *Black Faces in the Mirror*, Chapter 2

Apr 14 (Tues)

Political Polarization and Democratic Stability

Readings

Kollman 12.3

- Liliana Mason, “Uncivil Agreement”
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Apr 16 (Thurs)

Protest, Social Movements, and Democratic Participation

Readings

Kollman 10.4 + 11.3

- “From *Making Young Voters: Converting Civic Attitudes into Civic Action*”
- “The Loud Minority: Why Protests Matter”

Response Essay 3 Due (submit by 11:59 PM)

Apr 21 (Tues)

Criminal Justice and Democratic Citizenship

Readings

Amy Lerman and Vesla Weaver, *Arresting Citizenship*, Chapters 1 & 2

Apr 23 (Thurs)

Voting, Elections, and Democratic Accountability

Readings

Kollman 10.2 + 10.5

- Leighley and Nagler, “Who Votes Now?” (Excerpt)
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Apr 28 (Tues)

Democratic Erosion and Institutional Stress

Readings

Kollman 15.1

- Mettler, “The Submerged State” (Excerpt)
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Apr 30 (Thurs)

Final Paper Workshop

Students bring draft outlines for discussion and peer feedback

May 5 (Tues)

Reflections on American democracy and course themes